

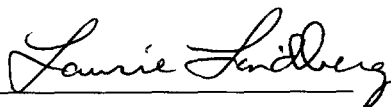
Ich Liebe Dich

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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ABSTRACT

A young man, Michael Carlisle, raised alone in an abusive home by his alcoholic father, finds his world torn apart. After going to live at the foster home of Alan Stevens and his wife and children, Mike tries to adjust to life in a real family environment. Eric Fox, a detective with the Detroit Police, befriends him and is his guide through the difficult journey of learning to love and to trust.

This story is based on the life of a real young man who has made just such a journey. In a conversation some time ago, he shared with me the prayer he repeated to himself each morning so that he would know that he could make it to see the sunset each evening: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

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Ich liebe dich

by **R o b i n F r e e m a n**

A short story in fulfillment for
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Submitted to: Dr. Laurie Lindberg

Chapter 1

"Mom!" yelled a little voice from the hall closet. "I can't find my raincoat."

Julie Anders looked exhausted and it was only 7:30 in the morning.

"Andrea, can you help your sister, please?"

"I'm on the phone."

"Already?" Julie stuffed a turkey sandwich into her daughter's lunch box. "With who?"

"Lorrie," Andrea replied.

"What? You're going to see her in less than half an hour. Help your sister find her coat."

"But mom..."

"Now."

"I've got to go. Emily can't dress herself," she said loudly enough for her sister to hear.

A tiny head peeked out from behind the closet door, wispy brown curls bouncing around big green eyes. "I heard that and I can too!"

Emily was the youngest of the Alders children. She had skipped kindergarten and gone straight to first grade at the age of five. No one was to forget it, either. She made sure of that.

Andrea hung up the phone grudgingly and stomped across the kitchen to where her little sister's feet were sticking out from a pile of coats in the bottom of the closet.

"Found it," she announced proudly. She scooted out backwards and plopped down in the floor to smooth the wrinkles out of her pink and green plaid rain coat.

Andrea grumbled.

"Okay, guys." Julie held up two brown paper sacks. "Grab your lunches, grab your backpacks, grab your coats, and let's go." Julie opened the front door. "Don't forget, we're having a guest over for dinner tonight and I expect you both to help me out when you get home."

Morning was usually hectic; today had seemed overly calm, Julie thought as she watched her kids climb into the bus. Andrea headed straight for the back, Emily crawled up the steps on all fours and stopped at the top to say good morning to the bus driver. Julie smiled to herself.

She leaned against the inside of the door once she got back into the house. Just think. . . only thirteen thousand more things to do today before 3:00.

"You'd better appreciate this," she chided, glancing at a picture frame on the mantle.

Chapter 2

"Why're you doin' it that way?"

He was always curious. Anna seldom took his questions in good heart.

She stared down at her math homework. "Because this is how I'm going to do it," she scowled.

"Hey, peanut." Nancy tousled his hair. "Why don't you come in here and help me out? I'm making popcorn balls."

"'k, mom." Anna gave her mother a look that clearly said *'thank you!'*

Michael followed her into the kitchen like a puppy. He used all his might to pull a dining table chair over to the kitchen counter. Nancy handed him an apron as he crawled up on the seat.

She tied the strings behind him while he held his arms up like a scarecrow. "You'll be careful up there, won't you. You're a long way off the ground."

He nodded, his little blue eyes glittered as he peeked out the window above the sink.

"What's daddy doin'?" he asked as he craned his neck to see his father hunched over the bushes in front of the house.

Nancy glanced up. "He's trimming the hedges."

"How come?"

She handed him a spoon and started adding the ingredients into the blue ceramic bowl. He used both hands to stir.

"Well, if he doesn't trim them, they get all straggly."

"How do they get straggly?" He was concentrating very hard on keeping the spoon firmly against the bottom of

the bowl.

Sometimes Nancy just wasn't sure what to tell him. She couldn't imagine the sorts of things he'd ask when he wasn't three.

"You know how plants grow little branches all over, right?"

He nodded.

"Well, we want to give the bushes a haircut to keep them square."

He nodded again and screwed up his face. "Okay."

Nancy laughed to herself.

Chapter 3

milk
eggs
hamburger
frozen veggies
lettuce
salad stuff
decaff
pudding
LICKRISH

'Licorice?' Julie crossed it off the list with a smile.
'Nice try, kiddo.'

She rounded up the rest of the groceries and headed for the check-out lanes.

"Julie Anders, where have you been all my life?" The accent was unmistakable.

She turned around.

"How've you been darlin'?"

"Oh, keeping busy."

Eric Fox was sharp; his clothes always pressed and well-matched. He was British all the way around. At one time, he had been a major player in British Intel. Now, he was a detective at the Detroit Central Police Department. Most saw it as a major step down from the prestige of his previous job, but '*not so*,' he always said. He was happier in his job now than he had ever been as an agent. It was nothing like a James Bond movie.

A linguist at heart, Eric took pride in his ability to

match dialects of nearly anyone he spoke with to their particular homeground most anywhere in the world. He spoke at least 18 languages, most very fluently, and had even worked as a translator in at least a dozen United Nations pow-wows. Eric was a genius, and there were times when he liked you to know.

"Ms. Anders," he smiled. "Won't you marry me?"

Julie laughed outright. "Why, Eric," she sighed, playing along. "What would your wife say?"

He dropped his eyes melodramatically. "Well, I could ask, but I'd really rather ignore that factor for now."

"Oh, I know you would, but the answer's still no. Same as yesterday." She laughed

"Okay, then." He grinned as he read over her shopping list. "Just come to lunch instead?"

"You're a kook." Julie began unloading the cart.

"No, not really." Eric handed her the jug of milk. "But you do seem to attract that kind."

Julie swatted him with her checkbook.

Eric scooted forward in the booth. "Now, wasn't that better than a cold chicken leg?"

The waiter collected their dishes.

"That's great that Andrea's finally through that mess with the divorce." He looked into his wineglass, disgusted.

"Dead fly?" It was all Julie could do not to crack a smile.

"You can be so classy." Sarcasm. When Eric lost his temper, he had sharpened it into the tool of a master. That's

part of what made him such an effective interrogator. His voice never rose above a normal tone. In fact, his voice neared a whisper as his anger rose. When in good humor, though, his cynicism kept things light.

He looked up. "You think Mike would mind my stopping by sometime tonight?"

Julie shook her head.

"It's been forever since I've seen him. I'd like to catch up a little."

"No, I don't think he'd care at all. And I know the kids would love to see you again."

He grinned. Eric loved Andrea and Emily. They were like his own children, who had stayed behind in England with their own newly growing families. Letters from them had become few and far between.

"Good," he said, as he stood and helped Julie with her jacket. "What time's dinner?"

She laughed. "Six thirty."

Chapter 4

There was a distinctly different aura that surrounded the Carlisle house nowadays. Anna and Michael had gone off to school and Nancy was left by herself during the long days. She'd never been alone before and the joyful tales of all the wonders of first grade from her son seemed to make it worse. There were days when she didn't want to listen anymore. Though she put on her happy face once anyone walked in the door, she had begun to spend hours locked in the bedroom crying and reveling in the misery that each day seemed to bring her.

These thoughts terrified her at first, and she turned to her husband, Carl, for comfort. Carl had come from an abusive home where his parents were always at each others' throats. He had worked very hard to make sure his wife knew how much he loved her. He urged her to talk to someone professional who could help her be herself again. He had even offered to go with her, but all she could do was think of the stigma attached to such a thing.

It came as no surprise to Carl the day she hung herself from a basement rafter, but still the abandonment he felt overwhelmed him. He would never be able to forget the horrifying screams of his children when he came home from work. They'd gotten home from school an hour before he had pulled the car into the garage. The sled they'd gone to the basement to drag outside had been long forgotten.

From this moment forward, Carl had never been the same. He turned to alcohol and lost all control of the things he saw around him. His family had spun straight into a living hell he could no longer even see in its entirety. He saw his carefree

son turned into a mime; his loving daughter become so bitter with the world that she seemed to have no love left at all.

The night Anna came to him in rage and hurt, he had been drinking for hours and had lost comprehension of his actions. He could never have hurt her on purpose. She had always been closer to him than her mother. She was daddy's girl while Michael had always followed Nancy like a stray. Carl had had to battle his feelings of jealousy that were now being amplified by the alcohol. After he had mentioned the psychologist, Nancy had not approached him again. When he would come home at night, she would retreat to the kitchen, pulling their little son with her by the hand. Drinking slicked over the fatherly instincts and brought to the surface only hatred.

When Anna burst into the living room that night, she had all the intentions of laying the blame she had placed on herself onto her father. She screamed at him until finally the anger in his eyes made her fall silent. He wouldn't remember exactly what he had done that night, but it was the turning point in his life when he truly realized that he was out of control but beyond caring.

Anna fell silent. She could see the wild rage in her father's eyes. At first, she thought he might actually strike her like he had so often done to her brother in his drunken fits. Instead, he turned away, trembling in anger. He spun back around and dragged her into the hall by her wrist.

"Michael!" His voice was cold and nothing but a harsh rasp as he yelled up the stairs. Anna watched the fear in her

brother's eyes as he came slowly down the steps.

All night long, the three carried all of Nancy's earthly belongings out into the back yard. Anna and Michael were both shaking with terror and tears. All the memories of their mother went into a pile near the garden. They stood in awe and terror as Carl doused the heap with the can of gasoline from the garage. There was nothing but a whimper as the book of lit matches fell and ignited an inferno.

"Get inside." Carl stared into the flames bitterly. Neither child moved.

"Do you hear me?!" He turned toward them.

The smell of spring rain made its way through the open bedroom window. Anna sat on the edge of her bed staring into the night. Her eyes were red and hot from tears. Michael was balled up on the windowsill staring down at the smoke curling out of the dampened ashes.

"How come we had to do that?" he asked.

"Because he's drunk, that's why." Anna's voice shook.

"Why does he drink?" Michael rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. "It only makes him mad."

"I don't know!" She was almost yelling. "I don't know the answers to all your stupid questions!" Anna stood up, scowling. Her hands were balled into fists at her side. She was beginning to cry.

"It's your fault," she blurted. "Everything was fine before you."

Michael's eyes narrowed. "It is not."

He wasn't going to let her do this. He'd learned. He

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slid off the window sill and started toward the door.

"He blames you."

Michael was determined not to listen.

"That's why he hits you." Michael paused. She'd struck the chord she'd wanted.

"It is not." His voice was barely audible now.

Chapter 5

Julie flew up the stairs and into her bedroom. She yanked out a clean sweater and flung her flour-covered sweatshirt onto the bed. Quickly, she ran a brush through her hair and headed back down to the kitchen, pulling the bedroom door shut behind her.

Andrea and Emily were at the kitchen table playing Yahtzee.

"Smells good, mommy." Emily crawled out of her chair and peeked into the oven.

"Your turn." Andrea was grinning.

Emily hopped back to her chair like a frog. "What'd you get?"

Andrea smirked. "A Yahtzee."

There was a pause. Emily was staring at her sister.

"What?" Andrea shrugged.

"You cheated."

"Why?" Andrea was still smiling. "Because you just lost?"

Emily glared.

Julie grabbed some plates. "Okay, guys. Let's set the table."

Nobody moved.

"Em, why don't you help me and Andrea can put up the game."

Julie hoped to draw their attention away from World War III.

Andrea tipped her chin into the air as Emily headed for the napkin bin. Julie grabbed a stack of dishes and handed off the silverware. Emily's favorite was the napkins. Julie had

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always had to begin setting the table an hour before dinner so Emily would have time to fold her napkins. She never folded them into the same shape twice. For her birthday, Mike had gotten her a book on origami. She had memorized it before the end of a week.

The buzz of the doorbell sent a wave of butterflies through Julie's stomach. She and Emily sprinted to the door in excitement.

When the door ripped open, Mike suddenly had the feeling he was about to be pounced on.

Chapter 6

Michael peeped through the banister on the landing to get a good vantage point into the living room below.

All clear.

He crept downstairs, winding a jagged path down the length of the stairway, avoiding all the squeaks. He smiled to himself. No one could get up and down those steps without their creaking but him.

At the bottom, he paused to listen for sounds of movement. Nothing. He glanced down the dark hallway, saw no one, and moved to the swinging door of the kitchen. He put his ear to it. Again, no sound. Opening the door a crack, he looked at the reflection of the room in the window above the sink. No one. Michael pulled on his galoshes and slipped out the side door.

The rain was coming down hard now and Michael covered his head with his arms to keep it from stinging his eyes. He splashed through the puddles to the back yard, grabbing a thick stick as he went.

The pile of ashes had stopped smoking and smelled moldy and vaguely rotten. He poked through the mound, looking for anything salvageable. A charred picture turned over as the stick lifted the ashes. Michael squatted and picked it up. The bottom half of the photograph was black and brittle from the flames. He tucked it carefully inside the pocket of his pajamas. He shivered from the rain and the cold. The upstairs window was dark. *Anna must have gone to bed*, he thought.

After several hours, Michael gave up. He sneaked back into the house and down to the basement. He kept his eyes from drifting to the empty side of the room. He'd already

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sworn to himself never to go back over there.

Michael kicked off his shoes and climbed up backwards onto the dryer. He was dripping. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his few treasures: an earring, part of a silver picture frame, part of a photograph, and Nancy's wedding band. He thought to himself how lucky he was to have found it.

After cleaning the items as best he could, Michael gathered them up and placed them on the ledge near the dryer vent.

"They'll dry better," he said aloud.

He nodded as if convincing himself that he wasn't just hiding them. He slid down from the dryer and giggled when his socks went *squish* on the concrete floor. Sitting down, he peeled off his socks and pajamas and wrapped up in a bath towel from the hamper. He found an old sweatsuit that was to have been donated to the Salvation Army and pulled it on.

Anna didn't crawl out of bed until almost noon. She rolled over to see Michael's empty bed and decided she should probably get up.

She didn't really bother to check to see who was downstairs. She didn't care. The only thing she felt inside now was emptiness edged with a little fear.

The house was quiet. Anna didn't think she'd ever get used to it, didn't want to. She walked past Carl, who was either asleep or passed out on the couch, she couldn't tell which. Michael looked up from his word puzzle when she entered the kitchen, but she said nothing. She pulled on a pair of boots and a jacket from the closet.

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"Where're you going?" Michael asked.

"None of your business."

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Chapter 7

Emily made a leap, having faith that Mike would catch her. He lifted her like a feather. She had her arms wrapped around his neck in a huge bear hug. Mike had a grin smeared all the way across his face as he reached out an arm for Julie. She squeezed him tightly.

"How are you?!" Julie herded him through the door, Emily still attached.

Andrea burst through the swinging kitchen door.

"Uncle Mike!" she squealed.

Mike squatted down so he could pry Emily loose. He'd barely set her down when Andrea clasped on. He hugged her tight.

Andrea backed up, still smiling.

Mike stood up. "I'm doing pretty good." He smiled. "It's good to see you guys."

Julie just couldn't stop grinning. She hadn't seen him since Emily was two. He wrote letters all the time and Andrea had taken to collecting the stamps.

Mike was a traveler. After his eighteenth birthday, he had taken what few belongings he could carry, sold the rest, and used the money for a plane ticket straight to France. He'd spent all his life, ever since he was a child, studying the sights, the buildings, the histories, and the languages of most of the European countries. He had shelves of books. Julie always thought that's what kept him sane during the trial and adjustment. He could always turn to Eric to get his thoughts off his father. Although Eric was the leading investigator on the case, he and Mike would spend hours talking about Europe; very often in French or Russian. Eric had even begun to teach

him some of the dead languages. Julie thanked God many times for sending them Eric.

After he had spent nearly a year as a starving nomad, Mike managed to nail a job as a tour guide. It was his dream job, now that he had been forced to give up all chance of going into architecture. He spent the spring, summer, and fall all over Europe and the winters living outside St. Petersburg, Russia.

"Show us a magic trick!" Emily was vibrating like a bow string.

"Come on, guys," Julie said. "Let's not drive Uncle Mike nuts yet."

Mike smiled. "Too late."

He pulled a ruble out of his pocket and the girls squealed as he began to spin the coin fluidly back and forth across his knuckles.

"Now watch very carefully." He motioned to the coin and the girls were completely mesmerized by the object that spun effortlessly through his fingers. Suddenly, Mike opened his hand and both girls stared, eyes wide. No coin fell to the ground. They swarmed over him to examine his hands. Of course, they found nothing.

"How'd you *do* that?" Andrea was frowning, and looking around for the coin. Emily jumped, as if startled. She reached a hand to her hair and the coin fell out into her palm. Julie stared in amazement.

"Wow!" Emily gasped.

Chapter 8

Anna walked in silence. Her hair had been carelessly stuffed beneath an old hat, her shoes were untied. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she wiped her eyes with her scarf. Her hands were tucked into her coat sleeves to keep them from the cold. She stumbled down the edge of the road, not caring who or what she came upon. The sun, though bright overhead, left the air crisp with a chill. There was steam rolling off the grass. The weather had been fair enough earlier in the week to melt the snow that had blanketed the city for close to two months. The snow had begun its reign the morning Nancy committed suicide. It seemed like only yesterday to Anna.

The wind rattled the chains that served to lock the cemetery entrance. The heavy wrought iron gates seemed fitting for the world of cold stone that lay beyond. Anna paused before the gates and shivered. A chickadee lit on a nearby lamp post and ruffled up its feathers. Anna watched it for a minute then slipped onto the gravel path. She walked down the narrow strip, letting her eyes wander across the stone statues and marble headstones. A few flags left over from Remembrance Day drooped in the dead air.

Making a turn down a row of stones, she finally stopped near the bare ground that marked her mother's grave. The new headstone, Anna thought, added a sense of finality to the sorrow she felt. This was only the second time she'd seen it since they'd picked it out. The stone itself was light gray marble flecked with white and black. Dark letters etched out the words that Anna had not been able to accept. Up until this point, she was able to deny the events of the past. But not now,

not with this stone truth right in front of her.

Anna knelt down and ran her fingers over the letters on the stone. Tears once again began to well up in her eyes. She lay down on top of the dirt grave and curled up inside her coat. She was still there when the sun disappeared over the horizon, shivering and nearly asleep.

A train scraped and squealed down the tracks behind the cemetery boundary and Anna sat up. She felt better, more rested somehow. Although she hadn't really slept, her mind was clearer. She wasn't going home. She couldn't. Her mind was made up. There were people in the area who would help her, she knew they would. It was a small town and everyone knew of the abuse that went on in the Carlisle home. Everyone knew, but nothing was done. Carl was a well-respected man, and this seemed to be enough to keep him above the gossip and even the law. Nancy had been so good for him. She'd brought him out of a deep depression and perhaps people thought the problems would pass with the grief. They knew how devastated he had been. But he was an abusive alcoholic, just like he'd sworn never to be; following in his father's footsteps and his grandfather's before that.

Anna stood and adjusted the flowers in the vases on each side of the stone. She brushed off the pieces of mud and dirt that stuck to her coat. She was smiling; something she hadn't done willingly for a long time. She bent and kissed the top of her mother's stone.

The Parker's doorbell buzzed when she pressed the button. Footsteps could be heard inside and the door swung

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open.

"Anna!" Joyce hugged her. "Good to see you, hon. Come on in."

Anna let herself be led into the living room.

"Paul," Joyce called up the stairs. "Anna Carlisle's here."

Paul's hair was still wet from his shower and he smelled like Old Spice aftershave. He sat down on the couch beside Anna and draped his arm over the back of the sofa behind her.

"Do you want some lemonade?" Joyce asked.

Anna smiled. "Sure."

The Parkers had more or less adopted Anna since Nancy's death. They were a young couple in their late twenties, and often times, Anna liked to pretend she lived there with them. They were looking to adopt, and the thought had begun to germinate and grow into the light and out of control in Anna's mind. She knew if there were any way, they'd let her live there with them. Paul was the county prosecutor and she was confident he could help her somehow.

Joyce handed Anna her lemonade and sat down in the chair opposite.

"You're here kind of late, aren't you?" Joyce asked.

Anna looked into her drink. "Yeah."

Paul dropped his arm to her shoulder. "You okay?"

Anna nodded. She had a lump in her throat as she began to think of what she wanted to say.

"Umm..." She paused to take a sip of her drink. It helped.

"I'm not going home," she blurted.

No one spoke.

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"I'm just not. I can't. I'm never going back there."

Joyce moved over to the couch and pulled Anna to her.

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They talked long into the night and when Anna was finally tucked into bed up in the guest room, she knew things would work out. She knew she'd be okay, just like Annie in the movie.

For the first time in a long time, she slept without nightmares.

Chapter 9

The doorbell chimed and Andrea skidded across the entranceway to see who it was. The smell of lasagna filled the house. Julie was in the kitchen, tossing a salad while Mike sat at the piano showing Emily how to play the theme song from "The Twilight Zone." Eric followed Andrea into the living room as she announced his arrival at the top of her lungs through the kitchen door. Julie nearly tossed the salad right across the countertop.

Mike looked up from the piano. Eric could see the marked surprise in his eyes. He sank into the couch and kicked his shoes off underneath the coffee table.

"'Allo mate."

Mike grinned. He'd actually missed hearing that accent.

"Long time no see. How've you been?"

Emily hopped off the piano bench and crawled onto the couch beside Eric. He tickled her knee and she let out a screech and squirmed against him.

Mike turned sideways on the bench to face them. "I've been keeping busy. Heard you've had a productive week."

Eric nodded. He'd just put away a child molester over in Midville that the cops had been chasing to no avail for nearly two years.

He switched to French to avoid contaminating the ears of the little one beside him. "He was one sick s.o.b."

Andrea's eyes got huge and Eric looked at Mike.

"She know what I said?"

Mike laughed. "Rather looks that way." He was often told he didn't speak French like an American. Natives

generally assumed he was from Switzerland, though he wasn't quite sure why.

"Where'd you learn that?" he asked in English.

Andrea was still staring at him.

She tipped her head up and flipped her hair over her shoulder. "From you." She grinned at him and trotted off into the kitchen.

Mike was nearly in a heap on the floor, laughing.

"Come on, Mig. It ain't that funny." He was chuckling, too.

Emily was giggling beside them, but she had no idea why.

Eric had taken to calling Mike 'Mig' years ago. It was short for 'Miguelito,' which was Spanish for 'Little Mike.' The name had stuck and Mike smiled to himself every time he heard it.

Julie poked her head through the door. She saw nothing but faux-angelic faces staring back at her.

"All y'all aren't foolin' me," she drawled. "I see those horns holding up your halos." She gave them a motherly look that clearly said she knew about the multilingual swearing. Her shoulders shook with silent laughter, making it hard to take her seriously.

"Someone want to give me a hand?"

Eric and Mike began to clap loudly. Julie rolled her eyes. *Great minds think alike*, she thought. If Emily hadn't been in the room, she'd have broken her own rule and called them both smartasses.

Julie curtsied. "Sirs..." She brought her hands together as if in prayer. "I'm honored."

Emily was giggling at her mother.

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"Now get in here, jokers."

Eric rocked back in his chair. "Julie." He shut his eyes as he placed his hands behind his head and stretched. "That was superb."

Everyone nodded agreement.

"So..." Eric watched Andrea clearing away the dishes. "I haven't eaten at home for two days now. Who's making my dinner tomorrow night?" He grinned.

Julie laughed. "I only cook one night a month."

Mike stood up and began gathering silverware. He had a gleam in his eye. "I'll cook."

Eric's eyes widened. "None of that weird s..." He stopped himself. "None of that weird stuff no one'll eat, eh?"

Mike just smiled.

It was nice to have company again. Although Julie would never admit it, she'd been lonely solitary in the house with the girls. She'd grown up in a family complete with siblings and both parents. She had sworn she'd never raise her kids in a single-parent home. If she had had a choice, she would have stuck to that vow. Eric always told her she'd done the right thing; cut it off before the real problems had begun. Sometimes she wished she hadn't stayed as long as she had.

Donnie was an alcoholic. It was some time after they had been married when Julie began to notice. She'd seen the effect it had brought upon Mike's family and she'd be damned if she'd let it come to that in hers. She'd been to enough Al-Anon meetings to know she had to leave him. Nothing else had worked and she'd let things go on too long. It helped to

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have the support of both her parents and his.

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Eric plopped down on the recliner. Julie smiled to herself. He was an oddity, at least by American standards. He did have manners somewhere, but he was at home in this house and social courtesies were low on his priority list. He kicked his socked feet up onto the ottoman and groaned. His head rested against the chair back and his eyes were shut tightly.

"I think I'm gettin' old."

"Getting," Mike quipped.

Eric opened one eye and raised his eyebrow.

"You watch it..." Eric dragged the first word out to at least three syllables for emphasis.

Julie laughed. Eric had forgotten what it was like being around his young friend. He was the only person he'd found since he left Britain that actually made him think. Well, apart from the violent crime offenders he profiled now and again. Mike was the only person he knew who could keep up with his silver tongue and he loved it. It was always a challenge.

Chapter 10

It was a beautiful day. There was the lightest breeze that reminded Paul that it was almost Spring. The trees along the sidewalk had begun to bud. Birds bounced from branch to branch. It was light jacket weather. Not quite warm enough for a tee-shirt, but too warm for a heavy sweatshirt.

Paul paused at the end of the driveway to adjust his tie and coat. He had all the legalities worked out and the paperwork with him. He doubted he'd need any of it, but it was there in case he encountered resistance.

Carl looked like he'd been up all night. His eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles under his eyes. Paul could smell stale beer. Carl didn't offer to invite him in.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Carlisle," Paul began. "Can we talk?"

Carl stood there numbly for a moment.

"Yeah." He shook his head slightly as if to rattle some coherence back into his clouded thoughts. "Sorry about that. Don't know where my manners are. Must not be awake yet." Both laughed forcedly.

"Come on in. What can I do for you? Want something to drink?"

Paul shook his head. "No thanks. This shouldn't take long."

"Have a seat." Carl motioned to the sofa.

"I'm not here to cause problems." Paul saw Carl stiffen slightly. "This is, however, important."

Silence.

"I thought maybe I could talk to you about Anna." He didn't hesitate. "Joyce and I want to know if you'd be willing

to let her stay with us for a while."

Carl said nothing.

"What I mean is, Joyce and I are concerned. She's a young girl and we feel she needs the influence of another girl in the house." Paul hoped Carl couldn't tell he was lying.

Carl nodded, his eyes softening.

"We've known her since she was born and maybe she'd be willing to try it for a while." He was trying to make this as non-controversial as possible.

"She hasn't been the same." Carl looked down.

Paul had expected more resistance, questions, something.

"Anyway, I took the liberty of drawing up some of the legalities. I can leave it here if you'd like to take some time to look over it."

Carl stood. "So in a nut shell, she'd be staying with you and Joyce."

Paul wasn't sure what to say. "Well, I guess that would be the gist of it. We feel she would benefit from a change for a time."

Carl nodded and thumbed through the papers.

"We know how much you care for your daughter." This time, Paul didn't have to lie.

Carl looked out the window. Paul could see the hurt in his eyes. "Is this what she wants?"

"Well, we talked it over extensively." He stuttered for effect to show the sympathy he was trying to portray. He'd learned how to read a jury and tell them what they wanted to hear. It helped him out in every angle of conversation, especially this one.

Carl sat down and there was a long silence. Paul let it

be.

“Where do I sign?”

Chapter 11

Andrea and Emily went upstairs to watch TV. They weren't interested in the adult talk that had begun. It was just as well.

Politics, history, travels... the evening brought the three friends to every topic that came to mind. It was as if they'd never been apart.

When Julie went up to put the kids to bed, Mike shifted the conversation to Russian. She returned and insisted they continue. She loved listening to them and often wondered what they were saying. It made her jealous of them, in a way. It had been very difficult for her to adjust when Mike moved in with them.

Julie had always been the smartest of her two siblings. Her younger sister, Leslie, was always more interested in sports than schoolwork. Adam was also younger, but only by two years. He was the typical high school boy; active in sports, but not overly. More interested in his hair and clothes than anything else. Julie, on the other hand, was secretary of her class. She was in the Honors Society and Student Council, chief editor of the yearbook staff, a member of the Debate Club and Academic Team; all those activities that the other popular girls participated in.

She was the family brain, until Mike came to live with them. At first, he was shy, but who could blame him. He had grown up in an alcoholic and extremely abusive home. After sixteen years, someone finally had the nerve to stand up against Mr. Carlisle. Eric felt he had no choice. The local police knew Mike too well and knew he wanted to keep the matter private. Eric had heard all his arguments, all his reasons to let things be.

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He cared too much about him to watch it go on any longer.

Carl had been arrested, incarcerated, and a foster home found for Mike before he ever left the hospital. He fought things the whole way, but he just didn't have a choice. Things were finally out of his hands and Julie often thought this is what bothered him most. He did have the local police fighting to make sure things worked out well for him.

The day Mike was to become part of the Stevens family, the entire household was abuzz. Everyone was excited, though Julie was the least enthusiastic. Alan and Sue had gone several times to visit with Mike, so the children had heard all about him, even though what they told them was usually only half-truth. Really, everything the family knew about him had been learned from Eric, the leading detective on the case, and Anthony, Mike's boss.

Alan and Sue were rather shocked to find that Mike's primary employment had been as a bartender at a local and popular bar and grille. This was, of course, kept from the state police. The local officers had vouched that Mike had only worked as a waiter. He, like his father, had a number of friends in high places. The Stevens had spent many an afternoon talking to Anthony. From Mike, they had only learned interests and other, more superficial information.

He did seem to be a very personable young man. It was easy to get lost in his humor, which he seemed to use to avoid the more personal questions. It was difficult even to detect his avoidance. He'd obviously had a lot of practice. Although he was very easy to talk to, which Anthony and Eric both attributed to his line of work, he had days when he made the Stevens feel very unwelcome in the white sterile room. They weren't sure quite how Mike would fit into their family.

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Sometimes, they wondered if they were doing the right thing; if this was going to work at all.

Sue had spent all week helping Leslie move her things into Julie's room, which wasn't the most favorable situation, but as their father had pointed out, it was better than living with their brother. Mike was to take Adam's old room, since Adam had decided to move into Leslie's.

Julie could never forget the day Detective Fox brought him to the house. Her brother and sister had gone off to school only an hour beforehand. She had stayed behind.

She remembered that he looked so small and afraid; a vulnerability she found later he was terrified of. He was silent as the detective talked to Alan. They discussed nothing pertinent but it seemed appropriate. Mike was trying his hardest to sink into the front porch and be swallowed whole. It wasn't working.

Eric passed a hand in front of Mike's unfocused eyes. He started visibly.

"You in there, pally?" Eric's eyes were soft and lent the confidence no one felt but him.

"Yeah.. sorry." Mike looked at his shoes.

Sue and Alan had practiced over and over what they were going to say, exactly what they would do. Nothing ever goes as planned.

Sue finally motioned for the two to come in. "Welcome home, Mike." She smiled. "I can show you your room if you'd like and you can put your things away."

Mike just nodded. His head was boiling with a mixture of fear and anger he couldn't grasp. He hated himself for being in this position and he vaguely had the same emotion toward the people around him. It was all so confusing. He shut his

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eyes for a moment to try and regain some composure. Sue led him up the steps.

Alan motioned for Eric to sit down. He declined.

"The doctors said he needs rest. No rigorous activity, nothing like that. He took the liberty to write down the next date for his physical therapy."

Eric handed him a manila folder.

"All I can tell you is good luck. You've talked to the psychologist?"

Alan nodded.

"All right then. I wrote my home number on the back of my business card." He motioned to the folder. "It's all in there. Feel free to give me a call. I already told Mike I was available at any hour. I doubt he'll ring me, though."

"I doubt it," Alan said. "He doesn't seem to share much."

Eric took a deep breath. He didn't like to be this serious, but the situation called for such. "This is going to be hard, I know. For all of you. You're very open. He's, well, lock and key. He's a different kid. I just hope he can get out of this without losing himself." He paused. "I'm glad he's with you folks. He couldn't have had better luck."

"Thank you, Detective."

Alan showed him to the door and watched him pull away. He lingered there a moment.

The leaves of the trees were turned upside down. The air had the tell-tale smell of rain and the breeze had died to a whisper.

Sue came downstairs. Alan met her at the bottom of the steps.

"I asked him if he'd like some time alone," she said.

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"Told him supper's at 5."

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Chapter 12

The house was silent. *Thank goodness*, Sue sighed. All three kids were seated at the kitchen table, homework spread all over. She wondered how they kept it all straight. Homework had always come first, as soon as school was over. It was a good habit.

"Hey Mom?" Julie tapped her pencil on the table. "I have a question."

"Let me get the grease off my hands."

"Can I help?" Mike's voice was soft but unexpected.

Julie touched her book. Mike wouldn't meet her eyes. It was something he rarely did, even now.

"It's Statistics," she said scornfully. Julie had been put in an advanced studies course with base college courses.

"Can I give it a shot?"

Julie looked up at her mom.

"He can probably do more than I could."

Julie smiled forcibly at him. "Go for it," she said flatly.

He pulled up a chair, ignoring her tone. He glanced over the question she was pointing to.

She smiled to herself when he looked up without speaking.

He sat back slightly and screwed up one eye.

"It's ok." She pulled her book back in front of her.

"Well, the answer's B," he began. "But I'm trying to figure out how to explain why."

Julie stopped.

"Why is it not A?"

"Oh, that's easier to explain." He glanced around for a pen. Julie gave up hers. He sketched a rough probability curve

on a scrap piece of paper. She noticed his hand shook and she could tell he was concentrating very hard on making the scale legible.

"Okay. What you have there is right..."

Julie smiled.

"For a one-tailed test of significance."

Her smile faded. "But this one isn't supposed to be one-tailed."

"No."

She frowned.

"Why?"

He sketched a flower and colored it in. On the other side of the page, he drew another flower.

"All right," he looked at her. "The guy in the problem looks at these flowers over here and notices a clump of blue ones."

Julie nodded. Sue listened as she squashed hamburger into patties.

"He's never seen this before and figures maybe it's just happenstance. Thinks maybe there are more over here than over there, but he wants to know for sure. He figures maybe it's some adaptation to something really important."

Adam was trying to spin his pencil between his fingers like Mike and was failing miserably. Julie gave him a look when it clacked onto the table for the third time.

Mike laughed inwardly. "So anyway, he takes all these samples from the two patches of flowers."

Again Julie nodded.

"If there's a bunch of these blue flowers in this one little cluster in his sample site over here, does it really mean there are more than over in this area?"

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Julie paused then shook her head. "Not necessarily."

Mike laid down his pen. "Exactly. Now, one-tailed test would mean he knows his results will show either lower numbers of blue flowers OR higher numbers, but not both." He paused. "Does he know for sure that there are more or less over here?"

"No."

"Right. Now, a two-tailed test would show him if there are more or if there are less. If he used a one-tailed test and found that there weren't more, how would he prove there were less?"

Julie sat up. The lights went on.

"He can't. He can only prove that there aren't more. What if there's the same number?"

Mike smiled. "Bingo. You have to think about what the experimenter knows."

She grabbed her pen. "Thanks."

Mike sat and watched her work for a minute longer before retreating back to his room.

Alan took a rinsed plate from his wife and stacked it into the dishwasher. "Mike, we'd like to talk to you about school."

Mike watched Leslie wipe off the counter with a damp rag. He said nothing.

"We know you've done extremely well with your home-schooling," Sue began.

Mike closed his eyes. He'd been dreading this.

"We'd really like you to try public school."

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Alan cleared his throat.

Sue put down her dishrag and pulled up a chair. "Neither of us are qualified to do the sort of things involved with home-school."

Mike just nodded. He'd known this was coming.

"The school has asked to have you come in and take a placement exam some time this week."

There was a strained silence.

"Is there any day that might be better for you?" Sue felt an incredible urge to touch his hand which lay face down on the table in front of him. She often found herself wondering how many times someone had touched him out of love; every time he shied away from a hand raised only as a friendly wave to a passerby, every time he jumped at an unexpected sound or touch, every time his eyes flashed with indisguisable fear.

She realized he was looking at her and wondered if he knew what she had been thinking about.

"Mary, good to hear from you." Alan motioned for Sue to pick up the other phone.

She lifted the receiver in the kitchen. "Hello, Mary."

"Oh, Sue. I have the cutest ornament pattern saved for you. I cut it out of my Country Living magazine. I'll bring it for you on Friday."

Mary and Sue had grown up together and met for lunch every Friday afternoon.

"Anyway, I called to talk about Mike's test scores. Is this a good time?"

"Sure." Alan straddled the arm of the sofa, his eyes

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wandering to the television to catch the highlights of the local news .

"I'm going to stick in a little personal opinion here. I think you're very right in wanting Mike to attend school. The interaction would be crucial to his recovery."

"Uh-huh."

"His scores were nearly perfect." There was a pause, then she continued, "He's so very young I'd feel uncomfortable allowing him a college placement series. As things stand right now he qualifies for a G.E.D."

Sue didn't see this as shocking news.

"What do you suggest?" asked Alan.

"Well..." Mary had spent a lot of time brainstorming the options. "Considering his background, I would really like him to get the normal contact of a public school setting. College would be ideal for him. That's the best social environment around. But, you also have to consider his age. He's so young I would be afraid to throw him into such a thing. After all, most kids his age would be first-semester juniors."

Mary shuffled some papers on her desk. "Because the home-schooling program won't accept his work since they found he was lacking a supervisor, what I would suggest is to mark him down as a senior here. He could qualify for the university-level classes that way but still be here in the controlled environment. Maybe we could even spark some enthusiasm in one of our extracurricular's."

The conversation continued much longer than Mary had originally planned and after a time, she was forced to excuse herself for an appointment.

"Thank you, Mary," Sue said. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

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Mary smiled. "You're very welcome. I'm glad I could help. I'll be here on Monday so why don't you come directly to my office and we'll get him settled in and everything."

"That sounds great. Thanks again."

"You bet, Alan. I'll see you on Friday, Sue."

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Chapter 13

Mike had always been a quiet person, reserved. He was by no means shy, he simply refrained from most conversation and was content to sit back and listen. Very often, Julie felt like Mike heard more than most people. She and Eric had discussed it one night over popcorn, Hitchcock's "Psycho" flashing patterns across the room from the television screen.

"He'd make a nice psychologist. . ." Eric had said, speaking half-truth.

Like Eric, he possessed the ability to become intimate with the thoughts and feelings of anyone he had information about. It was a rare talent, one which Eric fought with every night. Often, in violent crime investigations, Eric had used it to get a feeling for the suspect. He was able to think like these scum and he wrestled with it heartily at the end of an investigation. With every case, it seemed harder and harder to remember himself from what he had spent months trying to know.

Julie had discussed many things that night with her friend. Among them, she learned the truth about the hell Mike lived in for the first 16 years of his life. Eric shared secrets Mike had shared with him, lips and thoughts loosened with homemade margaritas. He'd regretted it the day after.

From the time Anna left, Mike had taken up residence in the dark concrete basement. He'd slept on a wad of blankets near the water heater for warmth. It was safer for him there. He stayed out of the sight of his father as often as he could and had found it easier to move from the front door to the basement rather than past the door of his father's bedroom. True, he had sacrificed a lot for his security, but he found it well worth it.

Days of movement free of the ache of broken ribs and dizzying headaches were few once he had turned ten, but Mike had closed himself off to become indifferent. He had attended school, carried on all the normalcy of a young man, but unlike others his age, he had a fear of walking through the door of his own house.

Many times, Mike had sat in the darkness of his cold haven, jumping at every noise from upstairs, starting at every footstep he heard above his head. His father was a true and sworn alcoholic with no recollection of most of his acts the day after. Mike never knew if he was oblivious because of the influences of his drug of choice or because he simply cared not to see the truth.

Somehow he couldn't believe it was purely due to blackouts. After awakening in the resulting mess of glass shards rained down from a bottle he'd taken against the side of his head, Mike saw recollection in his father's eyes. There had been no questions of concern, no readable thoughts passing through Carl's eyes at the sight, but Mike saw recollection.

Christmas eve had come and gone, just as it always had. Mike lingered after work long enough to play poker well into the daylight hours of Christmas day. On his way home, he waved to Eric Fox's wife as she helped unload the day's festivities from her mother's van.

He paused at the mailbox, forgetting that mailmen celebrate the holidays like everyone else. The porch steps groaned from the cold as Mike picked his way through the melting clumps of snow to the front door. He mumbled a tired

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swear word when the deadbolt kept him from the woodstove inside.

Mike peered through the condensation that had formed beads on the inside of the window pane. There lay Carl, passed out on the couch in all the graceful splendor of a hog. *There are times when I wish I owned a handgun*, Mike thought. He pushed aside the idea and blew warm air into his cupped hands. The window thermometer read 2F as Mike went around to the side door. Locked. *Dammit*.

He turned to retrace his steps. Perhaps Anthony would let him crash in the back room. Eric was standing on the front porch, nestled against the side of the recessed doorway. His eyes were closed and Mike could see the stress leave him with each drag on his cigarette. It almost made him glad he had no family to invade on the holidays.

The wind had picked up and Mike turned his collar up and shrugged his shoulders.

"Mike!"

Eric's voice carried easily across the crisp air.

Mike turned back. Eric was jogging across the yard toward him. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was noticing his escape. The Fox's rat terrier yipped and gave chase and Eric jumped over her when she tried to cut him off. He said something to the mutt under his breath that Mike could not make out.

Mike rocked back on his heels and grinned. Eric jogged past him and did not stop until he was safely out of sight. Turning on his heel and shaking his head in laughter, Mike continued on as if nothing had happened. He did not pause when he reached the place where Eric stood. Eric ground his spent cigarette into the sidewalk with his toe and

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fell into step beside his young friend. He could see the left over dregs of a black eye framing Mike's cheek bone.

"You locked out again?"

Mike nodded. "You avoiding your family?"

"I think when I scrambled, my mother-in-law was in a heated debate with my mum over the necessity of Jello salad for Christmas dinner."

Eric had known Mike for nearly a year. After encountering the fine line between friend and foe, Eric had decided he could be more of a help by being the neutral friend who would keep his family secrets. He offered unconditional friendship without judgment and it had only been recently that Mike had begun to open up.

Once the investigation had begun, Eric had to watch himself in order to stay on the case. If his relationship with his young friend came up, Eric would have surely been removed from the case because of emotional involvement. The only way Eric could guarantee the best choices were made for Mike was to be in on those decisions. Mike had put what little trust he could muster into Eric to help him get through things in one piece.

The whole ordeal had put tremendous strain on the already weak bridges Eric had managed to build between them.

"So. . ." Eric scuffed the soles of his shoes along the sidewalk. "Where are you off to?"

Mike shrugged. "Just out walking."

Eric chose his words carefully. "You know, I could use a sanity saver back there."

He saw no indication Mike had even heard him. They walked on in silence for another block.

"Why don't you come back home with me?"

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Mike stopped. "You cold?" Eric had his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans.

"I'm a little chilly."

"Go on home." He wouldn't meet Eric's gaze.

"Come with me." Eric had turned back to face his house.

"You've got family back there waiting for you."

Eric chuckled. "I don't claim them."

That brought a smile.

"But I'd claim you if you'd come with me."

Mike glanced up.

"You sure won't get any sorry and pity if that's what you're worried about."

Mike grinned.

"They're too absorbed in green Jello to give a shit about anything else."

Eric didn't give him a chance to form a rebuttal. He began to retrace his steps and hoped that Mike would follow.

"Besides," he said loudly. "We's Brits. This could get interesting. Last year, we nearly had two homicides, a suicide, a gas explosion, and wound up ordering Chinese before the end of the evening. You like Chinese, don't you?"

Eric could hear soft footsteps behind him.

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Chapter 14

Mike was secretly glad Julie had insisted he forfeit his hotel room to stay with them. He had always found hotel rooms to be a vacation when he was younger. Feelings had changed since he had accepted his post as a tour guide. Living out of a backpack, eating every night at a restaurant where now waiters knew him by name, hard hotel beds, dingy hotel carpet; they were all the same, from England to India. The winter months were much-needed relief, retirement to his own home, his own belongings, his own scant meals, and the ability to spread his things absolutely everywhere.

The house was quiet now. Julie and the kids had gone to bed long ago. He'd missed Eric. True, they talked on the phone regularly during the winters, but it wasn't the same. Mike had always told Eric he was a loner, but for some reason, he'd never believed him.

He was right. Deep inside his heart, Mike knew it. He'd always wanted someone to trust, someone who would trust him. He remembered how mad he would get when Eric would make some flip comment about why Mike acted the way he did. It was like looking into a mirror, and Eric intended him to see what was really there, not the stout front he put up for everyone else's benefit.

Eric was the only person in his life Mike had really opened up to. He knew it all, all the secrets hidden away layers beneath the surface. Once the trust had been established, it had never really been broken. The two would sit up early into the morning hours many nights talking about experiences, sharing feelings. It had torn apart Mike's foundations until he would sit on the floor and shake, partly from fear, partly of relief. He

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had never shared his entire life with anyone. It had taken over ten years for Mike to be honest with someone about his life. It had taken nearly thirty years for him to be honest with himself.

Eric had always felt like a father to Mike. He had loved him unconditionally. For a long time, Mike didn't know how to accept what Eric was handing him. All his life, people who had cared for him had abandoned him; his mother, his sister, his father. What he felt for Eric he could not understand. Those feelings were foreign to him, though he got more accustomed to them every time he picked up the phone and Eric's voice rang warm into the receiver. Eric would not leave him.

He often thought it foolish to be having such thoughts and experiencing these feelings this late in life, but he had had no choice. As a child, he had needed to grow up very quickly mentally. Emotionally, however, he was still very much a young child. It had taken the love of a stranger whom he met one evening behind the wire mesh of a Detroit squad car. Eric had arrested him for underage drinking when he found him weaving home from the bar one evening.

Eric had been the new cop in town, unfamiliar with the other policemen's policy regarding this particular young man. They had allowed him to continue to work in the bar and stay behind the law. They had even called to warn him when the state police were to be in town so he would not be found serving alcohol. Pity was all they had felt for him, but Eric was different. He had been the one constant factor in Mike's life and Mike had responded and thanked him for saving not only his life, but his sanity. It was Eric who had kept him from pulling the trigger the night he sat on the sofa with a gun to his head, it was Eric who had helped him make it through his life,

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and it was Eric who remained in his life. He did not disappear, he did not walk out. He had stayed beside him every step he had taken.

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Chapter 15

The garage door closed behind the Taurus, creaking and groaning as it slid down the tracks. *'I never did get 'round to fixing that,'* Eric thought to himself. He pushed the car door shut and squeezed between the front bumper and the metal shelving to the door of the house. Everything was silent, his family long since gone to bed.

Dishes were piled in the drainer; the red light on the answering machine blinked like a Christmas tree bulb. Eric turned down the volume and hit play.

"You have one new message. First new message, Friday, 10:30 p.m.. *'Hello Fox, it's Colby. I know it's late, but I thought I might catch you at home. I needed some help on a couple things, but I guess it can wait until morning. . .'*"

"Yup, looks like it can," he muttered as the message droned on.

The refrigerator light left blanched shadows across the gray linoleum. A hiss echoed when Eric released the pressure on a bottle of Michelob. He punched 'erase' on the machine as he passed it on his way into the living room. The television lit up with a 1970's comedy.

Eric laid his head against the back of the sofa, his beer resting against his stomach. His mind wasn't on "The Dick Van Dyke Show" tonight and he closed his eyes.

The newspaper lay on the sidewalk, just the excuse Eric had needed to knock on the front door. There was no answer from inside the house. The old Plymouth was gone from the

garage. Carl had probably gone out to refill on booze. The doorknob offered no resistance when Eric turned it and stepped inside.

His shoes crunched on glass and he set the newspaper on the hall table.

"Knock, knock," he called.

No sound.

"Anyone home?"

Eric picked his way through the glass in the hall toward the family room. Panic stricken, he dropped to his knees beside his young friend. Thoughts raced inside his head. He had to compose himself. He was worth nothing like this. Taking a deep breath made him feel calmer.

Mike's face was turned away from him, but Eric dared not move it. He placed two fingers carefully beneath the jaw bone, and was relieved to find a pulse. It would not have surprised him if he had not. Dialing with one hand, he stood. Mike lay partly on his back, facing the pine green divan. Eric pushed the divan out of the way as he went through the steps with the 9-1-1 operator.

It was difficult to tell the extent of the injuries. There was a deep cut running from the lower tip of Mike's left ear up and across his eyebrow. It had missed the eye. Eric couldn't be sure, but he thought he saw blood pooled inside the ear itself, though whether it was from the cut or something else, he could not tell. The remnants of a black eye were still visible and the other eye had begun to swell angrily.

Eric focused on nothing but his friend until the ambulance arrived and took him away. It was only afterwards that he began to examine the surrounding area. A shattered bottle of Jim Beam lay spread across the cushions of the sofa,

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and Eric assumed it was the cause of the gash. A lamp was overturned, as well as the small bookcase that stood near the television. Items had been swept off the mantle above the woodstove and lay strewn across the room. Even the end table lay overturned and two of the legs cracked away.

Eric was calm by the time Carl walked through the door. He had requested to be alone with him. The other officers smiled wryly and congregated in the kitchen. They were silent when they heard the sound of footsteps on the front porch.

Carl kicked the door shut behind him and dropped his car keys in the basket beside the discarded newspaper. He picked the paper up absently and failed to see the detective who sat in the leather recliner at the edge of the room.

"So, my *friend*," Eric hissed. "How's life been treating you?"

Carl started but recovered almost instantly.

"You had any burglars here lately. . .?" Eric swept his hand in front of him and indicated the state of the room. His voice embraced a dry venom that pulsed in the air, sending chills down Carl's spine.

Carl cocked his head and one side of his mouth curved into a smile. "I did a little redecorating."

Eric stood. "Yes, I'd say you did, didn't you. . .?" He let one hand drift to his side. His leather holster unsnapped and he caressed the cool handle of its captive with his thumb.

Eric continued to walk, slowly and methodically, toward the place where Carl stood fixed. He knew the man would not back away.

The two were eye to eye, Eric smiling a wicked grin, Carl resolute in his persistence to hold his ground.

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"I've been waiting a long time for this." Eric's voice was no more than a soft whisper.

"Oh? And what's that?"

"No, no." Eric wagged his finger in front of Carl's eyes. "You've got to let me enjoy this moment. Really, don't spoil it for me." His eyes narrowed, his grin gone.

"Would you like to be a good boy and slip these cuffs on, or would you like to try running?" Eric paused. "Because I'd like that very much. . . if you ran, I mean." Eric drew his gun. "I'm quite a good shot. But then, you were in the war, weren't you?"

Carl stood silent.

"You know all about shooting, don't you?" Eric clicked off the safety. "Tell me, *Carl*, have you ever been shot?"

Carl said nothing.

"Come on, answer me. When you were a big brave soldier, did you ever take a bullet?"

Shaking his head slightly, Carl started to turn away. Eric shoved him against the brick of the chimney hard enough to make him have to catch his breath.

"Where're you going. . .? I don't think I'm finished yet."

Carl turned around. "I am." His voice was low.

"You never answered me. Come on, *papa*, it was a simple one."

Rolling his eyes, Carl replied, "No, I never took a bullet. Now, I want you out of my house."

Eric laughed outright. "Oh, do you?" It was several moments until he could compose himself again. "You don't seem to understand. I'm not leaving. And you're not leaving."

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Not yet, and certainly not of your own accord."

The handcuffs clicked into place and Carl offered no resistance.

"What about your son, *daddy-o*. . . Did he ever take a bullet? A knife? How about an end table?"

"I want to call my lawyer."

Eric knocked on the kitchen door, letting the officers know that he was through.

"You'd better," he laughed, malice clear in his voice. "You're going to need him."

Eric walked back over to Carl, who was now in the hands of the local sheriff. He placed his business card in Carl's shirt pocket and tapped it with his index finger.

Winking at him, Eric turned to leave. "I hope he's good."

Eric had spent long hours at the hospital with his young friend. Mike was more apt to talk when he was flat-on-his-back bored. It was more difficult to dodge into less trivial matters this way.

Joan Gumptner was enthusiastic when Eric had mentioned the allegations against Carl Carlisle. She had agreed to prosecute before ever setting eyes on the case file. The two had been working closely, Joan doing the legalities while Eric talked to what seemed to be every citizen of Ann Arbor. By the time the trial had rolled around, there were enough testifying witnesses to keep the court busy for months. The case was an easy win and Eric kept Mike well informed of the goings on.

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After Mike left the hospital, it was nearly a month before Eric saw him face to face again.

Eric did not look up from the shuffle of papers when Mike knocked on his office door. He thought he recognized the knock.

"Sherm, if you need help, I'm not here."

When there was no answer, Eric glanced up.

"Migs!" Eric closed the yellow folder on his desk. "C'mon in. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Mike closed the door quietly behind him. "You got a minute?"

Eric rocked back in his chair and he motioned for Mike to have a seat. "Son, for you, I always have a minute. What's on your mind, my friend?"

Mike slid into the chair beside the desk. "Mold."

Eric smiled. He could see the outline of the hard plastic back brace through Mike's sweatshirt.

"When do you get to ditch that thing?"

"On Tuesday." Mike shifted in the chair. "Believe me, I'm counting down the days."

Mike had been in the brace ever since the accident. His back had been broken in two places. Eric had teased him incessantly and he'd had to learn to take it in stride. Eric had taught him to be able to laugh at himself.

A puff of smoke floated toward the ceiling as Eric lit a cigarette. "So how's school?"

Mike rolled his eyes.

"That good?"

He laughed.

"Yeah, that good. Half the time I spend my time doing pointless homework I've known how to do for years. The

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other half the time I actually enjoy myself. I think I like these university courses. The high school's trying to get me to become a peer tutor."

Eric smiled. "And you don't want to."

"No, I don't want to. I spend three fourths of my day in the company of a pack of self-centered jack asses. I sure don't want to see them of an evening too."

Eric took a long drag on his cigarette. "Well, pal, you're just too damn smart."

Mike groaned and stretched. "Geez, I can't wait to be able to slump again."

"You make it through this year, you're out of there."

"That's my one saving grace."

The two were silent for a minute.

Eric sat up. "You had supper?"

Mike shook his head as he watched Eric pick up the phone. "Julie?" Eric stuck a pencil into his Winnie the Pooh pencil jar. "Is your mum home?" A pause. "Well, this is Foxie. Could you tell her I'm stealing Mike? Tell her not to expect him for dinner tonight." Another pause. Eric chuckled. "Okay, thank you, darlin'."

The coat rack rocked as Eric pulled his jacket off. "So where do you want to eat, Myrtle?"

Mike laughed. "What?"

"You can leave your bag if you want. I've got to come back here before I run you home."

Eric held open the office door and Mike ducked under his arm. "Myrtle?"

A woman with an armful of books jogged up to Eric. He held his open palm at arm's length. "Is it life or death?"

The woman looked at Mike. "Not really, I guess."

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"Then it can wait until tomorrow?" he asked.

The woman shifted the books to her other arm. "Sure."

Eric smiled. "Thank you, Denise."

The hallway was dimly lit and Eric led the way to his car. "It was a flashback from a childhood book."

Mike looked puzzled. "What?!"

"Myrtle." Eric grinned mischievously.

A blank stare was all Eric received in return.

"Myrtle the Turtle," Eric said and tapped his fist gently against Mike's back brace. "Hard shell."

Eric sidestepped when Mike swatted at him. "Not funny."

"That's your opinion," Eric said with a laugh.

A soft breeze picked a napkin up off the table. The café was abuzz inside, but the tables outside were empty, except for an elderly couple at the other end of the patio.

Milk swirled through Eric's tea and Mike watched it.

"So, how are you getting on out there at Alan's?"

Mike yawned. "It's not so bad. It's hard to get time to myself."

"I imagine it is."

"Maybe I'm just not used to the whole family thing yet."

Eric nodded. "You'll get the hang of it. You need a real family."

"I beg to differ." Mike took a sip of his ice water.

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Eric opened his eyes, the television show he had been listening to now well over. He wondered how long he had been asleep and was grateful he hadn't dumped his beer down his pants.

The stairs creaked under his weight as he made his way to his bedroom. He didn't even bother to take a shower. He was too exhausted.

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Chapter 16

Mike couldn't sleep. He rolled over and stared out the window into the moonless night. His thoughts drifted to the day that had come to a close. It was nice to be in the company of familiar friends. He had spent the end of his teenage years with Julie, and Eric had been a mainstay in his life for a long time.

The job he had taken as a tour guide had always been his dream job and he would never give it up. He spent half the year in the places he loved sharing his knowledge with other people who shared his interests.

As a child, Mike had dreamt of being an architect. He wanted to design his own wonders of the world. His plan had been defeated after he had fallen skiing as a child. The incident had given him permanent but mild brain damage. His hands trembled from that point on and he had to put any career in art out of his mind. He had had to work hard to make his handwriting legible again. It was a tedious task and his penmanship still wasn't what it should have been.

The week Mike had in the United States to visit his friends went by much too quickly. His heart was heavy as he repacked his carry-on. Emily sat on the edge of his bed and watched him. She looked very close to tears and Mike put his arm around her shoulders.

"You okay, kiddo?"

She buried her face in his shirt.

"I don't want you to go."

Mike pulled her over closer to him. He had never been very good at consoling.

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Emily looked up at him, her eyes brimming over with big tears. "Can I come with you?"

Mike smiled. "You might fit into my backpack, but I think you'd grow out of it by next winter."

She grinned.

"Besides," he said, brushing a curl away from her eyes with his pinkie. "I think your mom would fight me for you. She'd miss you."

Lying down, Emily rolled her head onto Mike's knee. "I can't say very much in any languages either."

Mike laughed. "Want to learn how to say something in German?"

She sat up. The tears were receding.

"Yeah!"

"Ich liebe dich. Can you say that?"

"Ich liebe dich."

"That was good." Mike smiled. "You know what it means?"

Emily shook her head. "No."

"It means *je t'aime*."

Emily's eyes lit up. "I love you."

"That's right."

"I'll be back. I'm going to tell mom."

Mike watched her bounce away and put the last few things into his bag. He slid his watch onto his wrist and pulled his sleeve down over it. Picking up his coat off the bed, he carried his things downstairs and set them near the front door. He could hear Eric and the kids playing 'Go Fish' in the kitchen.

"It's going to be awfully quiet around here when you're gone." Julie touched his shoulder.

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Mike laughed. "I doubt that."

"Well, okay, maybe not quiet, exactly." She smiled. "Can I have a hug? I want to get mine in while I have the chance."

"I'm going to miss you guys." Mike picked her up off the ground and she yelped.

"We're going to miss you, too."

Mike laid his coat on top of his carry-on and Eric shut the trunk. Emily wrapped herself around his leg. "When are you coming back?"

"I'll be back, I promise." Mike touched her hair and squatted down. She gave him a kiss on the cheek and Andrea hugged him from behind.

"You guys are going to keep writing me, right?"

Both girls agreed.

Eric cleared his throat. "You saps."

Andrea stuck out her tongue in his direction.

Mike stood. "Okay, guys. I'm going to miss you. You be good. Well, on second thought. . ." Mike paused, glancing at Julie. "Your mom needs a little more stress."

Julie led Andrea and Emily into the road and they continued to wave until the car was out of sight.

"You anxious to get home?" Eric drove with one hand.

"It'll be nice to get back, I guess. I wish I could have stayed longer."

"Yeah, me too, pally. I'm going to miss your ugly mug."

Mike laughed.

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Eric looked at him. "You know I love you, don't you?"

There was no answer.

"You're like a son to me. I'm really proud of you. I wish you were my kid."

Mike had to fight back the lump that was forming in his throat. "Thanks. That means a lot to me."

Mike had gone all his life and never heard those words. He thought it was fitting that it was Eric who said them now.

The rest of the trip was silent, but a good silence, not an awkward silence or the silence that precedes bad news. Mike found himself smiling.

The garage was full and Eric was forced to park in the 20 minute parking zone. He walked his friend to the gate and they sat and talked about trivial things. The final boarding call rang out over the loudspeaker and Mike wished the flight had been delayed.

"Well, I'll see you soon, chum." Eric hugged him tightly.

"I am expecting you to pay me a visit this year."

Eric smiled. "Will do. You take care of yourself, now, you hear me?"

Mike nodded. "I will. You too, my friend. Be careful out there. I don't want my next trip to the States to be for your funeral."

Eric laughed. "You got it."

"I already lost one father. I won't lose another."

Mike walked toward the gate as Eric stood in silence. He was fighting tears. Mike turned to wave before he started down the long tunnel.

Mike laid his head against the back of the seat and closed his eyes. The raspy rhythms of Michael Bolton flowed

through his head from the cheap plastic earphones and the smell of dry chicken and tasteless vegetables wafted through the cabin.

Eric stood there a moment, then sat down in a seat by the window. He remained there long after the plane was safely in the air. A ticket was jammed under his wiper when he finally went back to his car. He shoved it into the glove box and sat there for several minutes before driving away.